

May 2020

ONcall

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inside

Be radically clear in your crisis communications

There are times for engaging storytelling and times for concise and clear communications. During a global pandemic, the latter is more effective. This guidance will help you provide the information families want and need without being too chatty or terse.

Communication skills for school administrators

Trust is built on good communication, which starts with the school leaders. Most school administrators don't get formal training in public relations and engagement, and they have a very big job. Here are tips to make school administration easier by building trust and goodwill through public relations.

Creating institutional change

The COVID-19 pandemic will leave lasting changes in work systems and individual practices. Change is natural, but it is not generally this abrupt. Read an eight-step process to plan for successful organizational changes in your district.

Graduating in a time of COVID-19

This year's seniors got an unlucky break. Most of them will not get the recognition — the pomp and circumstance — that they deserve for their years of hard work and achievement, but they can still be celebrated. Read these ideas for graduation during social distancing.

Maximizing community partnerships

A crisis is an ideal time to understand the mutual benefits of community partnerships, but the ideal time to build partnerships is before the crisis. Community partners want to support schools and provide expertise, and they have a stake in school success. Define your goals for partnerships and start to build your community team.

INSIGHTS FOR PARENTS: Resources for learning during closures

Learning doesn't stop when schools are closed. Parents can benefit from having a library of online learning references to engage their children. Here are recommendations for academic support and engagement.

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Be radically clear in your crisis communications

Storytelling is the most powerful form of communication. Forget it for now. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, this is a time for “radical clarity” in school communications.

You must deliver the information people want to know as concisely, specifically and easily as possible.

Don’t confuse what people want to know with what you think they need to know. Those are not always the same.

Remember the caveat of good writing: Show, don’t tell.

So, Mr. Know-it-all, what is “radical clarity?”

I’m so glad you asked. The four opening paragraphs illustrate “radical clarity.” It’s writing that gets straight to the point. It’s writing stripped of pretense, agenda or elaboration. It’s terse but not brusque. It’s like a brief DIY video. “This is what to know about”

Think short and punchy. Short sentences. Short paragraphs. But with enough variation to be conversational. Another way to think of it is providing a quick-hit bulleted list of responses to what people are asking about.

I led this essay with the concept of radical clarity because such writing is the secret of effective school district communication, especially during crises. Communication is based on understanding the audience and communicating what the audience will want to know. Radical clarity complements adults’ short attention spans, especially now.

Enough chatter. Give an example.

“Dear students and families,

“All schools in the Hughesville School District will now remain closed through (new date).

“Starting (date), education will continue through distance learning. Teaching will be very different while covering much of the same material as in the traditional classroom.

“Teachers will email and post online assignments each Monday, including due dates and any submission requirements. Weekly instruction packets are being mailed to families for whom we don’t have email addresses.

“Remember, free bag lunches are being distributed at each elementary and middle school from 11:30 a.m. to 1:15 p.m. Monday through Friday, and at the school bus stops listed below.”

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“Here are more details. If you have questions, please call or text the district administration at 123-456-7890 or email Info@Hughesville.edu.

“(Brief sentence of appreciation or acknowledgment, if desired, with more appreciation/ acknowledgment later.)

Then come the details. By now, the audience will be receptive, not having had to struggle through a prologue.

Your emphasis on “radical clarity” sounds cold-hearted. Where is the empathy?

If you or someone feels the need to open with paragraphs of heartfelt sympathy for what families are going through and appreciation for the hard-working staff, please write those words.

Then throw them away.

OK, that was a bit harsh. What I really mean is, set them aside. Condense them and they will provide a worthy conclusion to the communication.

Seriously. I’ve written more than 15,000 pieces for publication, plus countless for internal consumption. Sometimes I yield to temptation and begin a piece with an effusive exposition of how deeply I care about this or that. Then I come to my senses and discard those self-absorbed paragraphs with a shudder. Writing is not about me, the author; it’s about the audience.

Please, please remember that the audience — parents, teachers, bus drivers, students or others — wants to know what affects them. Prolific words of commiseration or appreciation are lost when they stand between the audience and the news.

I recognize that this advice may go against our instincts. We do care, and we want to show that. The best way to demonstrate caring is by understanding what the audience wants and immediately providing that information in bite-sized nuggets that easily can be absorbed. To do otherwise is to be self-serving and counter-productive.

What does the audience want to know?

Ask them. If the audience is parents, talk with several. Read their social media posts.

Ask for their specific questions, so long as you don’t come across as out of touch.

Accept responsibility

The No. 1 mistake I’ve seen in viewing scores of coronavirus press releases, press conferences, videos and the like is starting with ponderous, albeit heartfelt, pronouncements of commiseration and appreciation. The No. 2 mistake is blaming someone else for the situation, such as, “The Governor ordered us to close schools, so we are following”

Who cares whose fault it is? You might; the audience doesn’t. There are ways to neutrally say you’re following so-and-so-’s directive without casting blame.

In other words, practice the civil behavior we try to embed in our students.

Show, don't tell

Don't say, "We're doing everything we can to ...". For one thing, it sounds pompous. It's also a falsehood, and the audience may catch you. What we really mean is, "We're doing everything we know how to do and that we can within our budget, staffing levels and other constraints."

I'm not suggesting that you say that. Instead, tell what you're doing.

Leave it to the audience to decide whether you're doing everything you can.

Make it easy

Again, consider the audience's time. Don't waste it by sending an email that says, "The Hughesville School District has provided updated guidance on such-and-such. Click here to read it."

Put the "updated guidance" in the body of the message. The recipients have opened the email; don't ask, or expect, them to take another step. Links to additional information are fine if used judiciously, instead of an expectation being placed on the recipients.

No storytelling?

I love storytelling. You may want to post success stories. People can draw encouragement and inspiration from them.

But don't mix storytelling with providing information. Anecdotes will come across as unwanted tangents, no matter how relevant they might seem to their authors.

This is a time for the radical clarity of a short, clear intro; an informational but not overwritten middle; and an empathetic wrap-up.

Contributed by Dick Hughes, communications consultant. Contact him at TheHughesisms@gmail.com.

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Communication skills for school administrators

Good school communications builds trust within a school community. If the school has a communications plan, implements it well, communicates consistently and responds to crises with professionalism, empathy and promptness, all school operations are more likely to run more smoothly.

Understanding how to communicate effectively is an essential skill, and many school administrators have little or no training. They must learn on the job through trial and error, hoping that they build these skills before the next crisis.

Do you have a plan?

The current health crisis is not a good time to develop a comprehensive communications plan. Schools are in crisis mode, and the focus is on sharing updates with families, communicating with staff, and planning next steps. Schools that lack channels of communication for sharing this information will need to quickly outline a plan for short-term emergency needs. When it is over, the focus can shift to setting up systems for the next crisis. Take notes about what worked and what caused concerns or confusion.

Principals are leaders, managers and executives

Research consistently shows that the success of leaders in any business depends on communication skills, and communication is often at the top of the list of the most important skills for managers and employees alike.

Successful communications represents a major part of the job for any executive or administrator. To motivate educators, manage staff, earn the trust of parents, the community, and the public, they must handle operational tasks with skills and convey competence — while following the rules of a public agency.

Communication is not a newsletter, social media profile or a monthly meeting. Those are tactics. Good public relations depends on building strong, positive relationships with your audiences through trustworthy, regular information.

Learning from peers and experts

School administrators have a full plate. There are many helpful resources to help build or update this important skillset. The National School Public Relations Association publishes a guide to public engagement for school leaders. “Principals in the Public” offers effective ways for school leaders to build community support, research opinions of staff and parents and develop a plan and tactics for reaching a diverse audience. www.nspr.org/content/principals-public-engaging-community-support

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Principals can also seek support and guidance from their peers at other schools and from the district office. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; what works in one school is often effective in another.

Universal findings

According to NSPRA, the following are common effective communication findings among schools:

- Parents read school newsletters.
- Teachers are the most credible source of information about your schools.
- Parents are less concerned than schools think about national and state test scores.
- School quality is judged by staff and principal interactions with students and parents.

www.nspr.org/principals

PR Principles

Principals can be more effective at communicating by understanding some basic principles of public relations.

Build relationships, understand people

Direct connections with people are the most effective way to communicate effectively. The successful school administrator has to be part psychologist, part communicator and part business manager. Success depends on knowing the district's audiences, reaching them and speaking and listening to them directly.

Don't make assumptions

Administrators need to motivate people, but first they need to understand the perceptions and attitudes of the target audience. The only way to have accurate information about any person or group is to proactively listen, watch and ask the right questions. Pay attention to body language and look at actions as well as words. Taking time to do this is critical to your ultimate success.

Timing is everything

Your plan should include what you say and when you say it. Bad timing can be almost as bad as not telling people at all. People who feel uninformed or "left out of the loop" may take actions that are harmful to the organization. Think through what groups need to know about any particular topic, the order in which they need to learn the news and how you will manage the flow of information. In almost every case, you will want to start by sharing information on the "inside," with fellow administrators and your staff. If the news is something that affects students and parents, they should be next in the sequence of contacts. If it affects your volunteers, key communicators and others, you will want to include them. Think about the timing, quickly make a list, and make sure those who need to know something have the information at the appropriate time.

Everyone is a communicator

School staff are credible sources of information about schools. If the general public has a negative perception of your school, check in with staff and work on attitudes that may spill into the community. The opinions and perceptions of staff members spread like wildfire. If they have concerns, try to understand why and address issues that are causing negative perceptions.

Remember that the members of your staff consist of more than the teaching staff. The successful administrator knows employees who serve as support staff — secretaries, custodians, instructional aides, bus drivers, etc. — are as important in successful public relations efforts as members of the certificated staff.

Emotions affect perception

Trust is based on feelings. No matter how many facts you present, they will not be accurately “heard” unless the person receiving the facts is open to hearing them. If that person has had a negative personal experience with an administrator or someone else at a school, they will probably interpret any facts negatively. If they have had a positive personal experience, the reaction will probably be positive.

Speak directly

Printed materials are important tools, but they are seldom completely read. We all get a deluge of information every day, which means that we retain very few facts presented in written material.

Face-to-face and more personal communications works much better than written material. Use written materials as only one way to reach your audience. And be sure to write for them: know the reading level of the intended audience and write different types of materials for different audiences. To reach the most people, try to write to an eighth-grade level.

Find your key communicators

Identify the “key communicators” in groups you want to reach. Key communicators are the people who shape the attitudes of the rest of a group. Get to know those people first, and keep in touch with them. The key communicators need to hear from you and have conversations with you whenever something happens in your school that might be important to them and to the other members of their group. When appropriate, ask for their opinions. Ask them to help you tell others.

Establish a pattern and stick with it

Resist the urge to go back to hunker down during stressful times. Establish a system of communicating that includes all of your audiences and shares what they need to know and what they want to know. Find the ways to reach them effectively, and seek ways to listen to input. Doing this additional work upfront will ensure smoother operations and better relationships.

Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant

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Creating institutional change

We are living in an era of unprecedented institutional change. Not only has the pandemic required us to think about and approach schooling much differently than ever before, but we must also approach the fact that children, as well as adults, are dealing with a lot of personal loss at the same time. Fortunately, most school districts have risen to the challenge.

John P. Kotter, author of “The Heart of Change,” believes that creating successful institutional change is more about getting people to understand the need for change on an emotional level, than about proving the need for it with facts and statistics. He believes that change comes from seeing a truth, feeling it, and then changing it.

Chip and Dan Heath, authors of “Stick: How To Change Things When Change Is Hard,” agree that to really motivate people, you have to get them emotionally invested. “Babies are born every day to parents who, inexplicably, welcome the change. Think about the sheer magnitude of that change! Would anyone agree to work for a boss who’d wake you up twice a night, screaming, for trivial administrative duties? Yet people don’t resist this massive change — they volunteer for it.”

The silver lining to this terrible crisis is that schools have a lot of support for the changes that they need to make right now. Due to the current situation, people who might otherwise be resistant to change have accepted that change is necessary, if perhaps temporary. But that doesn’t mean that they’ll simply go along with whatever you suggest.

Kotter’s research showed that all successful occurrences of institutional change followed an eight-step process, whether they meant to or not. It’s a process that you can use as a blueprint as you plan to make changes in your organization.

Step one: Increase urgency

This step is all about getting everyone on the same page that change needs to happen, and not just “someday,” but now. In our current climate, we have a jumpstart. Everyone is on the same page here, and the urgency is apparent to everyone.

Step two: Build the guiding team

“When there is urgency, more people want to help provide leadership, even when there are personal risks,” says Kotter. Getting the right group of people is key. They need to be passionate about results, but they also need to be people who can get things done, meaning that the people they work with will follow their lead.

Step three: Get the vision right

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This is possibly the most important step. The vision, your action plan, needs to be clear and actionable. This can be difficult when the change is in response to something like this pandemic, with information changing rapidly and the future murky.

Focus on bright spots. Are there places where the change you want to implement is already being implemented? What can you do to expand the success instead of focusing on the failures? Chip and Dan Heath say, “The bright spots give you an action plan.”

Who is already nailing this? What can we learn from them?

Step four: Communicate for buy-in

According to the Heath brothers, “what looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity. So provide crystal-clear direction.”

Communicating to people why change is needed, exactly what the change will require from them, and addressing their anxieties and concerns at the same time, creates a space for people to accept your vision.

The key to this communication is making sure that everything you do is in line with the new vision. Kotter says, “In highly successful change efforts, members of the guiding team help each other with this problem.” Check in with your team to make sure that your focus stays on the goal.

Step five: Empower action

Empowering action, more than anything, means removing the obstacles that stand in the way.

What is the use in getting dozens of schools fired up to make a change if your directors are against it? People want to be good at what they do. Part of your job is to get out of their way.

Step six: Create short-term wins

“Without sufficient wins that are visible, timely, and meaningful to others, change efforts inevitably run into serious problems,” says Kotter. As your team starts to succeed at making changes, pay close attention to where the successes are. They may not come from where you expect, but you have to be ready with rewards.

In successful change efforts, the leadership team focuses on tasks where they can achieve visible and meaningful achievements early, to spur people on to greater successes within the vision.

Wins have the power to take the air of the sails of the cynics, and give those who are working hard to achieve the vision and emotional uplift to keep up the good work. Everyone likes to be on a team that’s winning, right?

Wins also provide one more essential ingredient. According to the Heaths, “When you engineer early successes, what you’re really doing is engineering hope. Hope is precious to a change effort.” Hope is also something that all our institutions can use right now: hope that we can weather the storm, hope that we can come back as successful as we were before.

Step seven: Don’t let up

Now that you’ve started to see successes crop up, it’s important to keep the pressure on.

Many change efforts fail right at this stage, when an early success makes the leadership team relax in the belief that everything is going as planned.

In more normal times, the next step would be to start tackling bigger issues in pursuit of your vision. But be careful with the process and feel free to take it more slowly than normal. Again, people are feeling more vulnerable right now. It's not just students losing family members — your teachers and administrators are juggling work from home, family responsibilities and also deep personal losses at this time as well.

Step eight: Make change stick

This step isn't going to be a problem in our current climate. We simply don't have the ability to go back to the way it was before — not right now. The difficulty may come in adjusting from the “new normal” back to regular life.

One thing you can do is keep an eye on the areas where things are actually working better than before. At some point the pandemic will be over, and regular school functions will resume, and it's possible to use the experience to improve things overall.

The United States Marine Corps has a saying, “Train how you fight.” What it means is that often during a war or other emergency, people will skip over unnecessary steps and just do what's important — they streamline the processes. The USMC looks at emergencies as great opportunities to see areas where they can streamline.

Are you finding that a multi-step process of getting permission from multiple parties via paper was replaced by a simple email confirmation? Is that a process that can continue in the future? Are you finding that more people attend staff meetings via video conference than ever attended in-person meetings? Maybe that's a meeting format that could become a permanent change.

Did you find that teachers who have been reluctant to move their coursework online have finally done so and are starting to improve their skills? Maybe that's something they can be encouraged to keep up with after things return to normal.

Those are just some possible areas where this situation might have a silver lining. The truth is that these are truly difficult and historic times we are living through. So, most of all, be generous of spirit with the people on your team. A little bit more kindness and thoughtfulness will make all of this change go down more smoothly.

Contributed by Megan J. Wilson, a Los Angeles-based freelance writer and communications consultant.

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Graduating in a time of COVID-19

How to share the stage and celebrate students during a national pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc and creating uncertainty. But one thing is certain: The Class of 2020 will graduate this spring — somehow, somewhere. In this unfortunate time, those students deserve recognition for their hard work and achievement. Even if you have a “fauxmencement” to honor them, make it remarkable.

Many of our daily tasks and activities have moved online. We are conducting meetings online and relying on technology to keep us connected. During this time of social distancing and virtual connection, our schools, students and their families are moving many of these rites of passage online as well.

Virtual activities do not replace personal connections, but they are better than nothing and some are pretty good — all things considered.

Before you make plans to expand your digital reach, check in with your technology staff or get a consultant. If you are wringing your hands over what platform you need to virtually convene a large group — or even a series of smaller ones, you can make graduation a simple “Facebook Live” streaming event, or hand it over to the creative forces — the grads themselves.

Start thinking themes: Be daring, historic

Don’t just be the “Class of 2020.” This year’s class is graduating in an unprecedented time with memories — tragic and triumphant — that will endure for generations.

To help you find your theme:

Consider stealing the COVID-19 acronym: **Nineteen ways to Commence Onward with Vitality, Inspiration and Dedication.** Think of creative ways to use the number 19: Top 19 in their class; 19 ways they served the community; 19 promises they’ll make; 19 best school memories. You’re not making light of a pandemic ... you’re claiming their right to a future. Create your own meaning of COVID — or feel free to steal that one. Our gift.

A less ambitious plan is to use the social distancing number — challenge your grads with ways to use the number six and post their ideas. What can you do six feet away? Six things I learned in school; six things I will do for my community, my world, myself. Send six cards to people who changed your life. Donate six dollars to a charity and explain why. Give a \$6 tip.

Play it safe with traditional theme ideas: The year for resilience, virtual connection, community, healing. You can flesh out this list. Consider a contest with the board/parent

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group/business leaders for the selection committee.

This could be your year to start a new approach — your 2020 graduating class can leap over barriers. After all, they're the Class of Online Visual and Independent Determination, right? (Just providing another acronym idea here.) Ask your class leaders to plan their own graduation — a good online learning activity to earn credits (maybe the juniors, too). You might get a remarkable, two-way interactive ceremony from a generation where digital is second nature.

Test options with your IT staff (or get help) on the best platform to livestream a graduation ceremony or event. Your choice depends on if you want a one-way production, or interaction.

Ideas for an easy, straightforward event

- Theme ideas: resilience, virtual, community, healing, creating a new world. You can flesh out this list. Consider a contest with the board/parent group/business leaders for the selection committee.
- Live stream the graduation ceremony, combined with embedded, pre-recorded video messages from the board chair, music performances, valedictorian, etc.
- Pick your 10 people who can gather (depending on current rules in your state); space them six feet apart on stage, with a board chair or superintendent “convening” the ceremony.
- Trade off reading names of graduates as their photos flash on screen (find or get them sent in now), then slide into a gallery on the screen (and saved online). Ask seniors to send in a favorite (and appropriate) photo.

Make this year a creative community ceremony

Consider delaying the ceremony into summer to create something amazing that involves the entire community. Post messages on reader boards and electronic banners wherever they exist.

Approach your business leaders to ask each business to “adopt” a set of kids and maybe extend special deals, depending on the size of your town. Ask churches — any organization that has an online presence — to celebrate your graduates.

Every family of a graduate will hopefully be planning something, even small; ask if you can “host” something for them on your website or social media pages, even if it's just their student's photo, virtual hugs or “throwing the cap in the air” through video. Or, link to all their “ceremonies” from your district website.

Ask families or graduates to submit creative ways they're connecting; via photos or quick videos — an artistic stacking of sticks or wood, or hula hoops, for example. Start by asking, “how are you connecting” with the world?

Good quotes are easy to Google. One of our favorites for the COVID era is this, from the *Tempest* by William Shakespeare: “O, brave new world, that has such people in it!” Those people are your class of 2020.

Celebrating
Graduates

May 2020
Page 3

Here's an inspiring clip to see how the graduating class from Wellesley did it:
www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/17/us/wellesley-college-graduation-coronavirus.html

Bows, salutes and elbow bumps to all!

Contributed by Shannon Priem, APR, former public information director for the Oregon School Boards Association and is senior content specialist for Salem Health where she shares information about COVID-19 with hospital staff and community.

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Maximizing Community Partnerships

The old African maxim, “It takes a village to raise a child,” is true of schools as well as families.

Schools aren’t islands, and in order for students and staff to thrive, they need the support of those around them. Community partners play a key role by providing resources, opportunities and support that students otherwise might not have.

Everyone benefits when schools and communities work together to support learning. These relationships not only provide tangible benefits to the schools but also help to strengthen ties between the schools and local partners and create a community that is invested in providing a quality education for its children.

While most schools love the idea of community partners, they often don’t know how to find them. Some schools are lucky to have partners literally walk in the door. But most need to cultivate and grow partnerships, much like they do their school gardens. They must plant seeds with local organizations — make presentations to local civic groups or talk with the director of a nearby senior community — to let them know how a partnership would benefit both sides. And when a partnership starts to develop, they need to nurture the relationship like they would a new plant.

The mutual benefit of community partnerships

Community partners can work with schools in a variety of ways. They can provide cash or material resources to support a particular school program. They can offer expertise by allowing employees to be guest speakers or mentor after-school clubs. They can allow employees to volunteer during the workday, tutoring students, setting up science experiments and helping in other ways.

Some companies have found school partnerships to be an effective way to ensure they can maintain a qualified workforce. In one Oregon school district, a large welding company partnered with the high school’s welding program. They donated equipment, helped develop the curriculum and promised well-paying jobs to students after graduation.

Some local companies partner with schools to offer after-school jobs and internships. Some provide expert staff to work with teachers to fine-tune the curriculum to address changing needs in their industry and assure that certain skills are taught.

In some districts, high school English classes have partnered with local assisted living facilities, and students have offered to help the residents write their life stories. It’s a wonderful way for the students to hone their listening and writing skills as they help the senior citizens put some of the memories they want to pass on to their families in writing. Beyond that, it

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helps older residents connect with younger people in a positive way and enables students to feel the value of helping someone else.

Schools that are located near a university can benefit from building partnerships with particular programs, such as the music department or world languages. For example, a high school that only offers a couple of languages might partner with the local college to allow students to take additional languages on campus at low or no cost. Or a university music department might invite the local high school orchestra to perform with them for a special concert.

Some districts organize or participate in local business councils where they meet regularly with business leaders and discuss how they can work together to better prepare students for the workforce.

Superintendents in some districts invite local business and community leaders to be part of a superintendent's advisory council. Members meet monthly or quarterly to discuss issues facing the district or programs that the district may want to start and offer feedback and sometimes resources.

Service clubs are great partners to schools. Many service clubs raise money to provide annual scholarships to the seniors in their local high schools. Others sponsor students to participate in exchange programs in other countries.

One of the most important partnerships schools can develop involves volunteers. Schools that develop strong volunteer programs reap the rewards of extra adult interaction with students, as well as the service they provide. For example, volunteers can tutor students in math and reading, lead small reading groups, play piano for music classes and so much more. They can help supervise recess, monitor the hallways between classes and accompany students on field trips.

Define your goals

As you seek community partnerships, it's important to define what you want to accomplish and to set expectations. If the goal is to create more job opportunities for students, then a goal might be for your business partner to agree to create an internship program and hire a specified number of interns during the school year. Having written goals makes it clear what each partner aspires to do to move the relationship forward.

Deciding who might be a good partner is often a matter of a simple conversation. Invite the owner of a business or president of a civic organization to coffee, and get to know them. Talk with them about district programs and your dreams for new opportunities for your students. Then ask if they might be interested in working together in some way.

As for who to ask, every community has a long list of potential partners, including:

- Senior living facilities
- Farms and agricultural organizations
- Granges
- Civic organizations
- Veterans' groups
- Local businesses
- Colleges and universities
- Forestry departments
- Retirees
- Chambers of Commerce
- Churches

Every school district can benefit from having community partners. The first step to getting them is just to ask.

Community
Partners

May 2020
Page 3

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant

For Families



Resources for learning during closures



**May
2020**

INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

For most students around the country, school has been disrupted — like so many other functions of our daily lives during this pandemic. Canceled for now or for the remainder of the school year, it is an unprecedented event for families and an unimaginable academic and social disruption for students.

An April 3 update by Education Week reports:

“12 states and one U.S. territory have ordered or recommended school building closures for the rest of the academic year.

School closures due to coronavirus have impacted at least 124,000 U.S. public and private schools and affected at least 55.1 million students.

There are at least 98,000 public schools and at least 34,000 private schools in the U.S., according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Those schools educate almost 50.8 million public school students and 5.8 million private school students.”

<https://bit.ly/3dSutv2>

Learning doesn't stop when schools are closed

This is a stressful time for parents. Helping their children maintain academic progress and fill their days with productive activities is only one more challenge. But it can also be an opportunity to explore new interests and reinforce lessons about gratitude for what we have and our attitude toward situations that are outside our control.

If there is a positive aspect to this fearful, disruptive time, it is that vast resources are available for learning that many people may not be aware of. We are fortunate to have access to educational resources to supplement school instruction or guide any student to discover new facts or learn new skills.

Finding learning resources

Online education is available for almost any interest or academic subject. Now is a good time for supplementing lessons for school subjects, such as algebra, or learning new skills, such as how to edit videos. This is a great opportunity to build your own adventure.

Your local school district is the first source for supplemental academic recommendations. Your child's district, school and teacher have likely compiled lists of sites for academic instruction and enrichment. Start here. Parents should review these instructional recommendations from school with their children. This school-based information may have resources that align with the school's academic goals.

Recommended websites

Academics: There are many free online programs to help keep kids on track for their grade levels. Check your school's website or seek recommendations from your child's teacher. A Google search will also yield many options, including the following reliable sites:

- **ABCmouse:** A subscription-based program for younger students that is free for the next month. This program offers educational games, books, puzzles and songs to introduce or reinforce early-learning skills.
- **Coursera:** Free and low-cost certificate courses, taught by university instructors. This site is for high school and college students.
- **Khan Academy:** Free courses, lessons and practices for students in grades K-12

Find more recommendations at Six Online Learning Sites Like Khan Academy:

<https://freesiteslike.com/sites-like-khan-academy>

Exploration: A teacher named Mrs. Fahrney put together a fantastic Google Doc of virtual tours around the globe. Her list has been recommended on several educational sites without fully identifying who she is and where she works. It is an extensive list of locations around the globe and in outer space with links to websites, videos or virtual field trips. Thank you, Mrs. Fahrney! *Visit the sites:* <https://bit.ly/2xKpps5>

- San Diego Zoo website
- Yellowstone National Park Virtual Field Trip: Mud Volcano, Mammoth Hot Springs, Yellowstone National Park tour
- Mars: Explore the surface of Mars
- Animal Cameras: Live Cams at the San Diego Zoo, Monterey Bay Aquarium live cams, Panda Cam at Zoo Atlanta, 6 Animal Cams at Houston Zoo, Georgia Aquarium has Jellyfish, Beluga Whales, and more
- Virtual Farm Tour: FarmFood 360 Canadian site, 11 virtual tours of farms with minks, pigs, cows, apples and eggs
- U.S. Space and Rocket Museum in Huntsville, Ala.: Saturn 5 Rocket
- Discovery Education Virtual Field Trips: Field trips including polar bears and the tundra, social emotional skills, STEM and manufacturing
- The Louvre
- The Great Wall of China
- Boston Children's Museum

Just for fun

Don't forget to have fun. When your kids need a break from the academic sites, there are many apps that provide an entertaining diversion. This list from BuzzFeed includes fun visual and auditory apps. Some are also available as a phone app.

This is Sand (create colored sand art): www.thisissand.com

Build a Galaxy (make a colorful galaxy): <https://29a.ch>

Tendrils (interactive music visualization tool): <https://epok.tech/work/tendrils>

Tone Matrix (make music with bells and tones): <https://tonematrix.audiotool.com>

Live Cam (a variety of live animal and nature cams): <https://bit.ly/2xMQP Xu>

Tetris (remember this classic game?): www.freetetris.org

Find more at BuzzFeed: <https://bzfd.it/3dROn9H>

Note: Please review sites first. Online comments are enabled on some apps and may not be appropriate for children.